## **#YALIVotes: "Give Young People the Feeling They're Cared About"**

(Kendra Helmer/USAID)

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Ako Essan Emile has seen what happens when elections go bad. He was attending a university in Côte d'Ivoire's city of Abidjan when violence broke out in the wake of the disputed 2010 election.

In the years since then, he's thought a lot about what it takes to bring free and fair elections to his country. "Much has to be done to build trust between young people and politicians," Ako said. "YALI Network members in Côte d'Ivoire have started creating a platform for young people to interact with political leaders."

He contrasted his experience as a Mandela Washington Fellow with his experience with politicians at home. "We came to the United States in August and we had the opportunity to talk to President Obama. We'd never had this opportunity in our country."

Ako sees open communication between candidates and the people they hope to represent as an important basis for better elections and better leadership. "Most leaders don't consider young people when making their strategies. They just use young people as bait to attract other young people."

Ako is the managing director of Radio Arc-en-ciel, a community-based station in the urban area of Abobo. In the months leading up to the October election, Radio Arc-en-ciel hosted roundtable discussions to give a voice to one of the country's largest (1.5 million) and least-represented communities and also to inform Abobo's residents.

"One of the key issues is lack of education about the electoral process," Ako said. "No accurate information is given, and if a politician comes into a community he will talk to the population according to his point of view, but not in a balanced way. People can be misled and it can cause conflict."

Ako Essan Emile (right) in the Radio Arc-en-ciel studio in September 2015. (Kendra Helmer/USAID)

In addition to the roundtable radio shows, Radio Arc-en-ciel hosted events that balanced live music with information. "We invited experts to come in and explain the electoral code to the population. If they know the electoral code, they will be able to monitor whether the election is going the right way or the wrong way. If someone doesn't have accurate information they can feel that fraud is going on, and then one rumor will come out and spark into violence and escalate into bloodshed."

With elections upcoming in Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger and Uganda, Ako pointed to things that worked well in Côte d'Ivoire in keeping the elections nonviolent and fair. "During our election, young people were on the ground as observers and were reporting live. Some other civil society organizations copied this example, so there were many young people spread around Côte d'Ivoire

reporting, which helped to deter any kind of fraud."

Ako sees responsibility on both sides for improving elections. Leaders must listen to the voters. "Young people should draft their own manifestos (or platforms), give them to the politicians and say, "These are our priorities."

And voters have to be responsible in how they use their vote. "Sometimes the population is much more passionate about politics than the issues that relate to them directly. In many capital cities, there's no access to water and electricity, and the roads are in bad condition. Mobilize to address these specific issues. I think more and more we need to select our leaders based on their manifestos and what they put forward, instead of voting for them because they come from our region or because they are the uncle of my brother or something like that."